

3 Mystery Ships Found in Florida Ports

CPYRGHT

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At least three chameleon-like ships that change colors and names were found along Florida's southeast coast Thursday following a charge by Fidel Castro that one is operated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The Rex, said by Castro to be in the service of the CIA, was located berthed at the Port of Palm Beach. A similar craft, the Leda, was docked at Port Everglades.

And a third, the Villero, has been using Fort Pierce as its home base but its whereabouts

Thursday were unknown.

J. A. Belcher, Miami oil company executive, said Thursday the 174-foot Rex belongs to him, but denied the vessel participated in raids against the Cuban coast.

"I'm a business man, not a

Don Quixote," said Belcher, a member of the Belcher Oil Co. family.

He said the Rex is operated by the SeaKey Shipping Corp., which he controls separately from his oil company activities.

IN AN accusing speech Wednesday evening, Castro described the Rex as the "mother ship" which launched two small boats Oct. 21 in an invasion operation

off the south coast of Pinar del Rio Province. Castro boasted his forces captured the men from one boat and that he would prove his claim by parading some of them on a television show.

Thursday morning the Rex was found at the Port of Palm Beach with twin empty cradles which ordinarily hold two small launches.

Several Spanish-speaking crew members stood on deck but declined to speak to

newsmen. Their reticence reflected the air of mystery which surrounded the ship.

Another port official commented, "Everybody just ignores that ship, including the Customs and quarantine people."

Port Operations Director J. Sonay Jaudon said, "The Rex comes and goes at various intervals. We don't ask any questions and they don't volunteer any information."

Night Dockmaster Fred Smith reported the ship was out of port Oct. 21 and did not return until Oct. 28.

BELCHER said he bought the Rex a year ago from the Paragon Co., a Nicaraguan concern, which formerly belonged to the ruling Somoza family but has since changed hands.

The Somozas are avowed enemies of the Castro regime

and are said to be actively supporting a proposed military operation against the pro-Communist government.

Belcher said that for most of the year he has leased the Rex for electronic research and oceanographic trips to the International Division of the Collins Radio Co., of Dallas, Tex.

He said that the ship's skipper, Capt. Alexander Brooks, told him the Rex had never been within Cuba's international waters and that it had never been engaged in anti-Castro war activities.

"I don't know if it has any connection with the CIA; I don't see how it could," reported Belcher.

ACCORDING to Castro, the Rex was employed by the Commandos Mambises, an anti-Castro action group based in Central America in an infiltration and smuggling maneuver the night of Oct. 21.

A reliable exile source in Miami said four members of the infiltration team have already been killed by Castro and that three of the boat's crew members were imprisoned. He believed the three surviving crewmen are those Castro will show on TV.

According to the exile source, a lone Castro plane opened its guns on the Rex, which returned fire. The plane subsequently left the scene and the Rex, with one of its 25 crew members injured, fled.

At Port Everglades, former Port Manager R. W. Spangler, now a port consultant, said officials had been instructed not to give out any information about the ships.

"It has something to do with governmental operations," he said.

The Leda flies the U.S. flag but harbor master records show it should fly the Nicaraguan flag.

A man acquainted with the Leda said, "She was a funny ship. She changed colors all the time. Sometimes the hull would be blue with a green deck. Other times it was gray with an orange deck."

At Fort Pierce, observers noted there were never any Customs officials around when the Villero came in. The ship flies the Nicaraguan flag.

On deck are plywood boxes marked "high voltage." Port employees maintain there are gun mounts under the plywood.

Castro said upon their arrival in Havana their plane was discovered loaded with explosives hidden in fruit.